

Mythics - Prelude

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Mythics - Prelude

by [bokunojinsei](#)

Summary

My (rather belated) submission for the HannibalBigBang.

Will is a hunter of mythical creatures, employed to bring mythics who fail to adhere to the new laws and order of society in to justice. When a falsified contract leads him to Hannibal's doorstep, however, things become rather complicated. But honestly, when it's a world of demons and monsters and magic, when are things *not* complicated?

Notes

This is my pathetically late submission for the HannibalBigBang.

Due to the fact that I have a LOT of things going on in my life right now and the time limit on the bang, I was unable to write the multi-chapter I plan for this story. However, I was committed to at least putting the idea out in the universe, and so I decided to write what amounts to the equivalent of a red band trailer for the actual fic.

My first duty is to Diligo Inimicus. No, I haven't abandoned that. I swear! Life's been a little bit of a shit, but once it calms down I'm going to finish Diligo and hopefully dive into this.

This is a glimpse into the story I want to write after it's all said and done. I hope you enjoy it, everyone. :)

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My artist collaborator, [@hannibalssketchbook](#) made this absolutely gorgeous piece to go along with the story. Thank you so much, dear! It's fantastic!



See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It was one thing to be slinking in the muggy alleyways of the city in search of a wayward vampire or slumming it in a backwater village to save the townsfolk from the grabby clutches of a demon, but the docks? Will hated the docks. The docks were all putrid muck and grimy old planks and he could smell the stench of oil that seeped out from the barges that passed through with their wares and conveniently accompanying diseases. Despite the fact that the fishery wasn't more than a ten minute walk down south, Will hadn't the damndest idea how the hell fish could survive in this filth. Then again, this filth was the runoff of Ostwich city itself and the people in there seemed to be surviving alright—if surviving was really the word for it at this point.

Scowling down at his boots and adjusting the holster of his revolver for the twentieth time that hour, Will kicked at one of the rotting boards of the dock and squinted out over the canal. It was a massive thing—more of a river Ostwich had arrogantly tried to claim for itself with barricades and entitlement—and he could see the shoddy masonry of the city shimmering just past the smog on the other side. He took a deep breath and coughed it back out. He could handle the smell of the city when he was in it; buffered by walls and people and business. Out here the wind carried all manner of decay with it as open and free as you please and it made his eyes water and his chest feel heavy.

Will groaned, flicked the hammer of his gun, scuffed his heel again with a clang of a buckle, and pulled the contract out of his vest pocket. It was a wonder the deputies even bothered to post these things. Common folk couldn't write for shit, it seemed, and the invention of the press with all its fancy buttons and smearing ink didn't seem to help much.

Lady Slyer Wanted

Will snorted and rolled his eyes. “Lady slyer”. Just another in a long list of drunken jokes because no one could be bothered to learn what things really were. He scanned over the contents, more out of boredom than anything else. Description, last known location, on and on as per usual. Almost nothing useful and everything pointless. It hadn't taken long to track down the incubus—because that's what it was, for fuck's sake—just a few well-placed questions and a well-placed boot heel to inspire a better pay cut and Will found himself standing on the docks, wishing he was anywhere else.

Signs pointed to the incubus working as a night sailor on the *Desdon*, a boat that just so happened to be mooring at this pier. Will watched as the sailors went about their business, unloading the barrels and nets onto the cobblestone just past the splintered wood. He considered taking out one of the crudely rolled cigarettes Jack Crawford, the chief officer in central, had given him like some sort of right of passage every time he turned in a contract, but there would be no point. Feigning nonchalance when his position was as obvious as the pungency of the bay would get him nowhere. He was a hunter and no one would believe any different. Especially not a mythic wanted for murder. As soon as the mythic spotted him, he would either make a break for it or do something especially stupid like attack Will outright. Either way, Will needed to stay focused.

Incubi were aggravating things. Arrogant, charismatic, and so entirely enthralled with themselves that it was a wonder they managed to have enough focus to draw in their victims. And victim was what they were, no matter how the mythic council tried to play off thralldom.

Be that as it may, a fight with an incubus was no laughing matter. Will was good at what he did, which meant no matter how irritating he found the smug bastards, he knew well and good that they could tear his head off if he didn't respect the physicality of their nature. They were strong and fast,

sure, but so were most of the damned hellions he dealt with. It wasn't the fact that an incubus could throw Will halfway across the canal with one arm and a good amount of resolve. It was the poison.

See, what most people didn't know about the so-called "lady slyers" was that it took more than a wink and a charming smile for an incubus or succubus to gain a thrall. Although the romantic nature of the rumor was amusing—assuming it was down to no less than witty banter and a slant of the hips—the catalyst was poison. Excreted, exuded, and seeping slowly into the victim until all independent thought became garbled and muddled and murky as the water Will was standing over right now.

That's what made them dangerous. And that's why Will still had his hand on the grip of his gun like he was ready to take his paces and draw.

He watched, chewing on the inside of his cheek and waiting. A few of the men looked over at him curiously, nervousness shadowing their features when they realized who he was; took him in with his weapons and stance and obvious purpose. The presence of a hunter always made people nervous. It was natural, Will supposed. A hunter meant a mythic—and not the kind of mythic that earned those civil rights protests and workplace allowances. No, a hunter meant a mythic had broken the law.

It meant the mythic was dangerous.

Pretty expected that kind of thing would make people nervous, given the circumstances. Will didn't pay the wandering glances any mind. They just wanted to know why he was here, maybe catch a glance of the hunt, go home and tell their families some exaggerated tale of an epic battle. That wasn't the kind of interest Will was looking for. He was looking for self-preservation. He was looking for someone who looked *caught*.

Face by face, Will scanned the sailors until one drew his eye. He looked just like all the rest. Tired, overworked, and dirty.

But he was the only one not casting furtive glances in his direction. His focus was pointed and resolute. He would carry his crates, eyes forward and unmoving, before moving onto the next. Will almost pitied the pathetic attempt at nonchalance. Instead, he settled for annoyance.

"Really? This is your game?" Will grumbled the words under his breath and rolled his eyes. He kicked the boards again like some sort of good luck tap and then set on his target, walking forward with a heavy clunk of leather and intent.

No sooner had he set the pace than his quarry dropped the act entirely. The man hastily released the crate in his hands and began walking swiftly away from the docks, disregarding the indignant calls of his fellows as he made a path towards the foundries.

Will had absolutely no desire to fight anywhere near the metalworkers. Too many ways for a fight like that to go wrong and he didn't feel like getting his arm burned off tonight, but the foundries were a good twenty minute walk and unlike most hunters, Will at least had the decency not to do this with an audience if he didn't have to.

So he let the mythic set the pace, walking with purpose into the night and away from the confused murmurs of the sailors back in the boggy canal. The man had shown no indication of aggression so far, but Will kept his guard up just in case. The easiest way to die in this day and age was to stop paying attention.

After a while, Will got tired of the ruse. “So how long are you going to keep this up?”

The mythic came to a stop, Will not ten feet behind him, staring off in the direction of the foundries and taking in a deep breath. Will tensed as he saw the man move, but it was only to cross his arms over his chest and continue his staring contest with the gravel. It was a long time before the man spoke—long enough for Will to start tapping his foot impatiently and consider shooting him just to get the damned job over with—but, eventually, his voice reached out.

“How did you find me?”

Will snorted. “You all assume you’re so damned clever. You’re not as good at hiding as you think you are.”

A hum of consideration and another sigh. “Well I suppose I could have tried harder.”

“Convince yourself of anything you like.”

Finally, the mythic turned to look at him. Will watched as the moonlight slid over his eyes, revealing the golden sheen he couldn’t have possibly seen from the distance back at the docks. Yes, this was his man. To his credit, the mythic didn’t seem afraid. In fact, he appeared surprisingly resigned.

In order to break the increasingly useless silence, Will tapped his revolver pointedly and raised a brow. “Look, you know there’s only two ways this goes.”

“I can see five.”

Will scowled and his guard went up tenfold. “Threatening—“

“Oh unravel your breaches, will you?” The incubus attempted to smile, but it was strained. “I’m not going to fight you.”

“Forgive me if I’m not confident about that.”

“Why would I? I know who you are. I would lose.”

That was not the response Will was expecting. Humility was not the strong suit of any thrall-based species. They were infamous for god complexes and hubris. Even if the mythic really did know who Will was, which was an unnerving thought, the likelihood that he would simply roll over and surrender was slim.

“Don’t look so startled, mister Graham,” the man murmured, shrugging with a graceful tilt of his shoulders. “Word of you is spreading down every dark alleyway these days. The rebellion and their pet hunter.”

Lead dropped down into Will’s stomach and made it roil. “Now you listen here,” he spat. “I’m no one’s pet.”

It was the mythic’s turn to roll his eyes. “Call it what you will, hunter, but you and I both know you’ve been skulking with the vampires in Henshire.”

Henshire was a wealthy district north of Ostwich, shadowed over by the mountains and a known residence of more than a couple nighttime wanderers. Will shook his head in defiance. “What

contracts I pursue are none of your concern.”

Frustration flashed across the man’s eyes, but he made no moves and so Will held his ground. “I’m not a fool. I’ve been there. I know the vampires head the rebellion as I myself am in the trenches.”

“And you what?” Will held his hands out. “Think that will inspire me to make an exception? I’m not part of the rebels, *boy*, and if you assumed so than you are gravely mistaken. I am employed by the city—“

The incubus waved a dismissive palm and Will instinctively touched his gun again. “Employed by the city, employed by the docks, employed by the damned academy. What does it matter where you are employed? What matters is your allegiance.”

“My allegiance is to law.”

“And does the law know the frequency of your visits to Henshire?”

Fed up with the tangent, Will drew his revolver and aimed it square at the chest of the man in front of him. “Enough of this.”

The incubus raised his hands slowly, levelling Will with a calculating stare. “I was entirely honest when I said where my loyalties reside,” he said. His forced calm was icy and thin. “The woman I killed was on assignment. I do not kill my thralls.”

“Becoming a thrall is death in and of itself,” Will argued, holding his gun steady. “You steal their minds. You murder their free will.” The words were spat like venom, disgust dripping from every syllable.

Much to Will’s disbelief, the incubus looked genuinely offended by the statement. “I never take the unwilling. The women with which I share my influence request that I do so. They are miserable in their lives, mister Graham. I offer them solace and comfort.”

“You offer to drain them of their lives!” Will shouted. He took a step forward, baring his teeth. “You are parasitic! You act as though what you do is a mercy. I have seen the victims of your so-called “solace”. They are mere husks by the end of it.”

The man’s pallor had taken on a sickly grey. “I assure you, that it not what I do. I am not *feral*.” The word *feral* was hissed and cutting, biting into the air like a knife.

Will had been through this enough times to have had this conversation before. Sometimes the mythics would fight, attack, flee. Some would claim they had done nothing wrong at all or deny being a mythic entirely. Then there were those who would barter and persuade. They would try their hand at convincing Will of their innocence, to let them go, to see their perspective.

Taking in a steadying breath, Will spoke. “If you know who I am, you know that no manner of chatter will dissuade me.”

“I am not attempting to dissuade you. Warn, perhaps.”

Will would have laughed if he wasn’t so aggravated. “Oh, how kind. And what kind of generous and benevolent warning are you offering?”

“Whether you admit it or not, you have ties in Henshire,” came the careful reply. “As my recent conquest was on assignment from that very place, perhaps you will consider what this current course of action could result in.”

“I do not work for them.”

“Even so.”

Groaning, Will rubbed at his forehead. “Will you come with me to the court or won’t you?”

The incubus frowned and for a moment Will considered the possibility that a fight may very well occur after all. In the end, the man’s shoulders loosened and he crossed his arms again. “Very well.”

With a sigh and an increasing feeling of exhaustion, Will holstered the revolver and turned to walk back towards the path, waiting for the mythic to join him. “If you try anything, I will shoot you in the head.”

“Seems rather excessive,” the incubus replied as he met Will’s steps alongside him, keeping enough distance between them to balance the tension on the needle’s point. “The knee would be just as effective.”

“It’s easier to lug a dead body than a limping one,” Will retorted.

“You are every bit the man they say you are.”

Will didn’t dignify that with a response. Instead, he made his way through the gravel until his boots were once more clicking along the cobblestone path. There would be a line nearby, posted close enough to the docks for emergency. From there he could dial an operator and request a cabbie to pick them up. There was no way he was going for a lovely night stroll with an incubus for longer than he had to.

It wasn’t unheard of for contracts to go along willingly. Many knew better than to fight a hunter in the end. The horrific stories of hunts gone wrong were often motivation enough. Will liked to think himself more reserved than many of his counterparts. Hunters like Tobias Budge were plucked from another deck of cards entirely. Tobias was known for the brutality of his hunts. After all, contracts almost always specified dead *or* alive, like an option laid out for convenience.

Will made an attempt to bring back his contracts alive—partially because a living being was easier to cart around and partially because he didn’t want Jack breathing down his neck for pissing off the mythic council for the hundredth time. Tobias made no such attempt. Oftentimes he would choose contracts in which only evidence of the death was necessary to receive payment. Will had lost count of how many times he’d seen Tobias toting a bloody sack right into court only to plop it down in front of a green-gilled deputy.

So, it wasn’t unheard of for mythics to come willingly. Not when you considered their other options.

The night was a blur from the point on. The cabbie came. The mythic went without complaint. The guardsman took the man into custody while Will dismissed the stares of the incubus, the deputy, and some scraggly homeless man staring in the window from across the road. He dodged Jack Crawford’s request on a report and made his way to a bar, pocket a bit heavier with coin and mind ready to be dulled by cheap whiskey and bad music.

It wasn't until he was halfway to the bar, walking down some abandoned street with cracking stone and the distinctive smell of sewage leaking up from the septic system that Will stopped, blinked, and looked behind him. The blur of the night honed in on one specific image. The homeless man from earlier.

There he was, standing twenty feet away with an unruly beard and stained clothing and looking at Will with beady eyes.

"And what?" Will hollered at him. "Out with it!" He just wanted the night to be over. He'd gotten his contract. Neatly, he might add. It was said and done. He wanted a drink and a bed and it was starting to seem like that was too much to ask.

The man shuffled closer, wringing his hands together and snuffling. He didn't speak.

Will was half tempted to give up and keep walking, but something in his gut told him to stay put and get to the bottom of it. "Come on, old man. Let's hear it."

Another sniff and the man looked back and forth, never quite settling on Will's face. When he spoke, Will knew why he had remained quiet.

"He's requested you, sir." The man's voice was hoarse and weathered, like rocks scraping together. It seemed to take every ounce of his strength to speak.

Will shifted, uncomfortable. "Who?"

"The duke, sir."

"I don't know a duke."

The man looked concerned and he shifted again, waddling closer. Will resisted the urge to retreat. Holding out scraggly hands, the man presented Will with a red scarf. The material was rich and smooth, nothing like the types of textiles you'd find in the possession of the many homeless wandering the streets of Ostwich. Hesitantly, Will took the offering. He knew what this was.

"The duke, sir," the man repeated as though it explained everything.

Only this time, it did.

Will grimaced as he felt the supple fabric between his fingers. "Yeah, alright, alright."

Nodding jerkily, the man scabbled away as though burned, disappearing around the corner.

Resigning himself to the fact that the night, apparently, was far from over, Will made his way to the nearest post and picked up the receiver. The operator was on the other end of the line instantly, polite and chipper tones far too peppy for Will's liking. He grumbled his request for a cab and snapped the receiver back into its holder, wrapping the scarf around his neck and leaning his shoulder heavily into the post.

The scarf smelled of lavender.

Will scowled.

It wasn't long before a cab made its way to where he was. There was a station close by, waiting and ready to haul drunkards back to their home from the cesspool that was the trade district and rob them of whatever coins they hadn't already spent on drinks.

When the cabbie saw Will was not of such a persuasion, his face visibly fell. Already he began to clam up, likely aware he would get no drunkenly excessive tip for his troubles from this fare.

"Where to, sir?"

Will chewed on his lip and thought for a moment as he slid into the cab. The scarf felt heavy around his neck. It felt like it was choking him. Unresisting and defeated, he shut his eyes. "Henshire."

The cabbie did an admirable job of hiding his discomfort as he set the vehicle into motion. No one liked to drive into Henshire, especially cabbies just looking for a good night of wages. Especially human cabbies.

Will sighed and took pity on the man. "You'll be fine. Just stay in the car and leave as soon as you drop me off."

The cab rattled and hissed and a squeal of steam slithered up into the air. The driver glanced over his shoulder and pressed his lips together. "You're a hunter?"

Will idly thumbed the strap of his holster. He may have put his duster on, but if any attempt to hide his accessories had been made, it had been lackluster. "I'm not on a contract. Don't concern yourself."

Naturally, the cabbie concerned himself. Miserable gossips, the lot of them. "En why are you heading smack into the bang middle of bloodsuckers, if yeh don't mind my asking?"

Will's eyebrows rose as the professionalism in the man's voice all but shattered in an instant, merging immediately into lowtown slang as the cabbie prepared himself to latch onto any interesting nuggets of information he could gain. If the man wasn't going to get paid well in coin, he was going to attempt to get the compensation of information. Ruffled, Will shifted in his seat and pulled his duster closed over his chest. "I do mind."

The man made a sound of disappointment, but didn't allow Will's refusal to deter him. "Come now, brother. Here I am, cabbieing you all the way up into dead town and you can't give me a smidgen?"

Dead town. That's what the common folk called Henshire. It referenced the copious amounts of vampires who had set up residence in the district, along with a few similar, less social species. The nickname would have made sense if vampires were actually dead, but Will didn't feel like explaining the semantics of science to this man, so he let it pass. "I've nothing to give. My business is my own, meser. Let's keep it there."

The flattery of the title had its desired effect. The cabbie preened at the complimentary nature of it and, blessedly, fell silent. The silence didn't last forever, but fortunately the yammering once the cabbie started up again was filled with nothing but stories of the other times he had gotten a hunter as a fare. He didn't ask Will any more questions, but he did tell the story of how apparently there was once an instance where he had taken a hunter to catch a werewolf and watched from his cab as it took over twenty silver bullets to take the beast down.

Will didn't bother arguing, no matter how ludicrous the story was. No one used silver bullets any longer. They were an archaic method in catching werewolves. While silver did have a tendency to cause more harm than not, it was far more efficient to use mercury and there were plenty of blacksmiths up to the task. He supposed silver and quicksilver were one and the same to a common man and so, once again, he refrained from explaining.

After what concluded as a torturous exploration into ignorance, the cab finally pulled up to a large manor. The cabbie leaned forward on his wheel to get a better look, letting out an appreciative whistle. "Well that's right nice, isn't it?"

Will grunted, shoving some coins over the barrier and into the cabbie's eager palms. "Seems so." Without so much as another word, Will left the cab and waved the cabbie away, waiting until the man was safely back on the main road before turning his attention to the house in front of him. The cabbie wasn't wrong. It was an impressive building—with columns and hand-carved shutters on the windows. This district was nothing like the crackling and shuddering decay of the inner city.

That wasn't to say Henshire didn't have a darkness all its own. The darkness was simply within.

Which was exactly where Will was headed right now. With a slight pause and examination of the scarf once more, Will made his way to the door of the manor. He didn't bother knocking. He could already hear the footsteps inside.

Sure enough, no more than two breaths passed and the door was being pulled open to reveal a thin and stern looking man.

"Mister Graham."

"Edmund."

Edmunds lips stuttered in an aborted frown. "I would prefer you referred to me as Thane, mister Graham."

"And I would prefer you called me Will after all this damned time, but looks like we've both come up short," Will answered blithely. "Letting me in or should I stand conspicuously on your porch until a patrol happens by?"

"You are well aware we have limited patrols in Henshire, *mister Graham*," Edmund stuck his nose up and didn't budge.

Will liked him. He was the only one in the whole blasted district he could really say that about. Well, Beverly was an exception, but that was a thought for another night. It was unlikely Beverly would be present at the manor at any rate. Will would have had more of a chance of seeing her at the bar he had been unceremoniously stopped from kicking up his boots at than here.

Eventually, Edmund gave up the farce with a glare and a stiff nod, stepping aside and letting Will across the threshold.

With Edmund and Beverly being the outliers, Will didn't care for this place. He found finery to be ostentatious and irritating. Sniffing, he crossed his arms defensively over his chest as he looked around—heavy drapes and gleaming brass and a massive clockwork timepiece hanging on the wall in the vaulted ceiling foyer. Every place in Henshire was like this. And every place in Henshire ground on Will's nerves.

Edmund waited patiently for Will to gain his bearings, standing stoically to the side.

Will swallowed back the thickness on his tongue and figured it would be better to get this done and over with sooner rather than later. “The scarf isn’t exactly mine, you know.” He gestured to the gaudy bauble around his neck.

Edmund nodded blandly. “I am aware.”

When no other words were forthcoming, Will made a short sound of exasperation. “Leave me in suspense then, I beg you.”

Edmund blinked, unphased. “Miss Abigail will be down shortly.”

“Abigail?” Will frowned and uncrossed his arms. That hadn’t been what he’d expected. He’d expected—

“Will!”

And suddenly found himself with an armful of grinning youth. Will smiled and even managed to ignore the sharpness of the teeth in the grin currently nestled under his chin. Perhaps he had a soft spot for Abigail too, but his impression on the remaining residents didn’t falter. Granted, the list of remaining residents was dwindling, but Will tried not to think too hard on the specificity of the direction of his displeasure. He cast his thoughts aside. “Hello, Abigail. I didn’t realize it was you who asked for me.”

Abigail stood back and smoothed down the front of her blouse, trying every bit to look a lady. Her grin remained, one of her fangs catching the corner of her lip. Will would have thought it was cute if it wasn’t for the fact he had killed three of her kind in the past six months alone. Dark times, but weren’t times always dark?

“It wasn’t me,” Abigail confirmed after a moment, shrugging. “I’m pleased to see you all the same, but Hannibal sent the scarf, not me.”

Will felt the muscles in his back tense. So it was what he had expected all along. “He’s calling himself a duke now?”

Abigail laughed and it was a rich and crystal sound. “No! Sounds like Guthry is the one who fetched you, then. He doesn’t have many words at his disposal.”

Will felt his jaw click as he held his tongue. An itching sense of wounded pride for being summoned like some lackey was chewing at the base of his throat, but it wasn’t Abigail’s fault. He’d save his wrath for the man who deserved it. “So where’s Hannibal? I’ve had a long day and I don’t enjoy the idea of it getting much longer.”

“Might not have wanted to come here, then,” Abigail replied cheekily. “You know as well as I do how much he likes to talk.”

Will sighed.

The young woman chuckled and pointed past the stairs. “Study. Like he always is. With his ridiculous collection of books. I’m sure he’s read them all a thousand times over with how long he’s had them. I don’t know why he bothers.”

Will wanted to say he didn't know why Hannibal did anything that he did, but such an admittance would reveal weakness that Will wasn't all that eager to expose in himself. Sweet as Abigail was and amusingly tolerable as Edmund was, Will hadn't forgotten what was at stake here. Ears everywhere, Jack always said. Some of the man's words stuck with him whether Will wanted them to or not. Jack's paranoia may not have been his greatest quality, but it sure as hell earned him at least a few measures of wisdom.

Friendly welcome or not, Will knew where he was and this was about as far from safety as a person could get.

"Well I guess I'll get to it then," Will muttered, giving Abigail a half-hearted smile as she ushered him towards the study.

Study was a modest word for where Hannibal spent most of his time. The room conquered two stories of the manor, shelved to the ceiling with books and objects the man had amassed over the years. And years were something Hannibal had, in his admittance to Will a few weeks ago, "in excess".

Like before, Will didn't bother knocking when he entered the room. He'd long since learned there was no point announcing his presence here. Any one of these individuals would be aware of him against his best efforts. Will, in turn, made no attempt to hide himself. You don't fight shadows with shadows, after all.

Hannibal was seated right where Will expected him to be, in a plush armchair in front of a crackling fire, book in hand and overcoat hanging by the door. It was like something out of a pompous painting—the type nobles so often propped up in their political offices to display their intellectual prowess. Will almost appreciated the predictability of the scene, but he knew better than to predict anything about this place and so his eyes narrowed, keen to pick up every detail he could.

Hannibal made no move to acknowledge him and so Will took that moment to run his fingers over the man's overcoat on the rack. Moist from the dew of a chilled evening. He had been out. The muscles in Will's jaw jumped and his revolver felt heavy against his side. He took two steps in, a buckle tapping on his boot, and scanned the room. Hannibal's shoes were near the fire. Most likely to dry. There was an uncharacteristically unkempt stack of parchment on the table near the armchair, purposefully placed and ignored.

Will adjusted the chest piece of his holster and rolled his shoulders. "You've been out."

"Always on the hunt, I see," came Hannibal's amused reply. He didn't look up, but Will knew he had the man's full attention.

"Yep, just finished one, in fact." Will finally shoved away his trepidation and made his way fully into the room, coming to stop by the uninhabited armchair to Hannibal's right. He remained standing. He wasn't comfortable here. This wasn't a friendly visit. That needed to be clear. His duster stayed firmly draped over his shoulders and he had a mercurial urge to throw the scarf into the fire. "So if you wouldn't mind telling me what your nightly stroll has to do with me being here, let's get on with it."

Unhurried, Hannibal let his book slide closed, gently setting it next to the parchments on his table and adjusting his posture to one impossibly more relaxed than before. Only then did he look up to meet Will's eyes.

Will faltered, if only briefly. Hannibal was always the most peculiar sight to behold. Regal, collected, pristine. The man never had a hair out of place or a thread out of grain. If Will didn't know any better, he'd wonder if the man's species allowed him some form of power over his image—a guise. Magic like that didn't run in vampire lines, however. Though their biology allowed for them to increase their appeal, they weren't capable of outright illusion in the way an elf might be. No, vampires were not explicitly magical, a fact that Will was distinctly relieved to be aware of. He hated magic and vampires were difficult enough to deal with as it was without spellwork coming into play.

No, this presentation was entirely Hannibal. Light brown hair, piercing eyes, the faintest hint of a smirk that never quite left his lips. Here was a being who had known for a long time how powerful he was and had long-since passed beyond the stage of trying to instill fear or respect. He had those things. He no longer needed to earn them with outright gestures of intimidation.

Will shifted and tried again. “Well?”

If anything, the smirk on Hannibal's face seemed to fade away ever so slightly, but he didn't look displeased. Far from it. “What makes you think my walk inspired your invitation? Perhaps I just wanted to have a conversation with a friend.”

“Then you should have invited a friend,” Will snapped. His boot tapped once, impatient. “I don't appreciate being *summoned* like a dog or a servant.”

Hannibal frowned and it was a minute expression. “I'm displeased that you found the gesture to hold such implications. It was not my intention.”

Will rolled his eyes and looked towards the fire. “Yeah, well.” He saw Hannibal gesture towards the empty chair out of the corner of his eye.

“Please, Will, sit.”

“I'll stand.”

If Hannibal could utter a long-suffering sigh, Will was pretty sure the exhalation let into the room then would be it. “Very well. You've correctly deduced that my request for your company is connected to the events of my outing earlier this evening.” He made sure to stress the word “request”, as though that would give Will a comfort somehow. Will snorted. “The hunt you referenced. It was an incubus that was your target, was it not?”

Will could feel his hair standing on end. Wary didn't come close to what he was feeling. “Not going to bother asking how you knew that. What of it?”

“I know because he was in our employ.”

Will's face betrayed nothing. “Vampires?”

Hannibal's lip curled, his first true expression all night. “Now you're simply trying to frustrate me. You know perfectly well our entire species is not a collective.”

A derisive sound escaped Will's throat. “Yes, well the incubus told me he was part of the rebellion. It doesn't make a difference. He murdered a girl, Hannibal. It's my job to put him away for that and you know it.”

“Your lackadaisical attitude towards the rebellion is going to get you into trouble, Will.”

“And who plans on enforcing that?” Will shot challenging look. “You?” He was playing a gamble now and he knew it.

Will had encountered Hannibal a good eight months earlier during one of his contracts. The entire thing hadn’t exactly been on the up and up from the start. Administrator Alana Bloom, foremost political candidate for mayor in the upcoming election, had gotten in touch with him through Jack and presented him with the contract personally.

Usually, Will got his contracts from the lower rungs—handed out to the available hunter by the deputies or posted to the bulletin in the seedier side of town. A politician stamping out a contract was never good news. Will should have known better than to take it, but Alana Bloom was nothing if not persuasive and ultimately the coin she promised to line his pockets with was more than enough incentive to take the chance.

Supposedly, the job was a simple one. Some low-level vampire with connections to the rebellion had murdered a bunch of construction workers who were repairing one of the foundries—torn them apart. It was a brutal scene if the report was anything to go by. And boy, if the rebellion wasn’t an association that should have warded Will off from the get-go.

The brass had decided the war between mythics and humans wasn’t going anywhere besides more bloodshed and the politicians and dignitaries had complained loudly enough about finances and trade losses. Ultimately, a truce was formed. Live in union, collaborative work opportunity, civil rights for mythics, inter-imperial trade routes—it was endless and exhausting and there were plenty of people who didn’t like it. Some were louder about their dissent than others.

One of the most vociferous voices was that of the rebellion. A mysterious group of mythics from all over the list of species, banding together with the belief that the war should never have ended in diplomacy and that mythics had gotten the short end of the stick. Will wasn’t about to argue with anyone who started to bicker about humans getting the better side of the bargain. It was true, but what he couldn’t—wouldn’t—condone was a bunch of savage and barbaric mythics murdering people in droves simply because they were displeased about the status quo.

Yet, despite knowing what he knew and having the foresight to see this could only go down a bad way, Will took Alana’s contract and set straight into Henshire like he owned the place.

Even the rebellion knew better than to question the authority of the police commission; for now, anyway.

When it turned out that his contract was on none other than Hannibal Lecter himself, one of the diplomatic ambassadors for the vampires that had migrated in from the Nordic mountains? Needless to say, Will was more than a little pissed off at Alana Bloom. She’d never given him a name. Simply a likeness, a location, and a crime.

And Will found himself standing face to face with one of the primary representatives of a species.

It hadn’t gone exactly how he expected.

Obviously, Will hadn’t fulfilled the contract. Slapped the file back on Alana’s desk the next day, in fact. He’s stared her straight in the eye and she hadn’t said a word. Her lips were tight and eyes cold and she took the contract back without complaint. In hindsight, Will should have said something.

He should have promised her he wasn't going to tell anyone, wasn't going to make a fuss, wasn't going to report this to the council.

But he honestly didn't know if anything he said would have been a lie.

"You've gone somewhere," Hannibal observed.

"Nowhere important." Will sighed and gave in to the temptation of the armchair, slumping down unceremoniously and hoping to hell that his dirty duster would make a mess of the fabric. He stared blankly into the fireplace, watching it crackle. Hannibal had never outright admitted to being involved in the rebellion, but he'd said everything short of signing a written confession for it. Will was no fool. He knew Hannibal was involved. "I can't give your rebels special treatment."

"I would not call my men rebels, but you allowing special circumstance was never my goal."

"Then why are you harassing me about putting one away?"

"Is that what I'm doing?"

Will spared the other man a sideways glance and made a face. "Stop the games."

Hannibal smiled, then, and it was as sinister as it was friendly. Will was certain only Hannibal could pull off such a countenance. "The games are the only thing keeping the both of us alive, dear Will."

Will had to stop at that. The mere implication that Hannibal's life could somehow be in any sort of danger was nearly ridiculous. The man was on the top of the ladder. He had to be nigh untouchable. "Are you playing me for a fool?"

Hannibal seemed to give the question genuine consideration before he answered. "I would had I thought you were a fool, but I do not. No, Will. There are many things you don't know. Although I had no love for Oren, what happened tonight was most inconvenient. It will have repercussions."

"Oren?"

"The incubus you detained."

"Oh."

Hannibal turned towards him in a full body lean, waiting until Will caught his gaze before he spoke. "I must admit, Will, I am struggling with how much to tell you."

Will's brows furrowed. Uncertainty was never a quality he associated with the man in front of him, but that's why he was here, wasn't it? Jack had said accept the invitations, listen to the words, keep the peace until he could find out something valuable. Let Hannibal talk until he slipped and revealed his hand. Get a foot into the rebellion so they could squash it before it became a legitimate problem. So Will took in a careful breath and held Hannibal's eyes with his own. "I'm struggling with why you want to tell me anything at all."

A smile with teeth—with fangs. "It's a curious thing. Perhaps I realize what a benefit you could be as an ally."

Will had played this farce so far by being himself. No reason to change that now. “I’m not going to join the rebellion, Hannibal. If that’s your end game, you can take this damned scarf back and reel in your next gullible bastard with it.”

Hannibal laughed. Actually *laughed*. “Who said anything about joining the rebellion?”

Will was seconds away from stomping his heels into the floor like an angry toddler. “If you really think—“

Hannibal cut him off with a wave of his slender hand. “What are your goals, Will?”

“What goals, Hannibal?” Will couldn’t help but let mockery slip into his tone. He was growing weary of this.

“In all of this. The war, the concordat, the rebellion, all of the smatterings of situations surrounding the three.” Despite Will’s petulant attitude, Hannibal was exuding an impressive air of patience. “Where do you stand?”

Of all the dangerous questions to ask a man in this day and age, that was at the top of the list. “I’m with myself. I’m with getting paid. I’m with the law.”

“And you agree with the law? Wholly and completely?”

“No one agrees with it wholly and completely.”

Hannibal nodded, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips, and he looked into the fire. “You’re almost as skilled at evasive responses as I am.”

“High praise,” Will quipped.

“Indeed.” There was a long stint of silence before Hannibal tried again. Apparently he wasn’t going to let the subject drop. “I find myself in need of unusual allies, Will. That is why you are here.”

So this was it, then. Hannibal was extending the invitation Will had been waiting for. Now Will just had to convince himself to accept the hand being extended. Damn it if that wasn’t harder than getting to this stage in the first place. “I won’t make any promises.”

“I expected you to require convincing.”

Will’s lips twitched in want to ask what the “convincing” would entail, but he held his tongue. “I’m not going to get some sleep any time soon, am I?”

“Forgive me, the lack of the necessity for myself causes me to occasionally forget the need in others.” While Hannibal didn’t necessarily appear apologetic, his words did not come off as disingenuous. “However, you are correct. If you agree to at the very least allow my proposal some consideration, we will need to venture out tonight.”

“I don’t even know what your proposal is,” Will countered, leaning forward on his knees. “Even for a vampire, this cloak and dagger is all a bit much.”

“You would be absolutely appalled by the carelessness I am employing right now, I assure you.”

“Comforting.”

Hannibal stood abruptly, adjusting the cufflinks of his shirt and walking towards the coat rack. “Are you coming?”

Recognizing the moment as “say yes or get out”, Will groaned and followed suit, significantly displeased when he noticed that his coat had left no traces of his presence on the fine fabric of the chair. It was a childish kind of desire, but he had still desired to leave something there—a splotch of dirt for Hannibal to remember him by. “If you kill me, I’ll be very disappointed.”

“As will I.”

Hannibal had a car of his own, as nobles and those of political importance tended to, and Will briefly admired the gleam of the black paint, running his fingers over it curiously. He had never been in a car like this. Mostly cabs and a random buggy here and there. This was nice.

“Where are you two off to?” Abigail was leaning in the doorway of the manor, curious smile on her face and brown hair draping in all different directions.

Hannibal paused at the driver door, looking as regal as he always did as he made some sort of gesture Will didn’t quite catch. “Nowhere of import, my dear, I assure you.”

Will could have sworn that Abigail’s smile faltered for a moment before finding its way back to full form. “And you didn’t invite me? Shameful.”

Will grimaced. The last thing he wanted was to bring Abigail along on this trip. Will liked Abigail. She wasn’t like the rest of her kind. She was gentle and pleasant. She was always happy to see Will. The last thing he wanted was to involve her in whatever Hannibal had planned. Then again, Abigail lived with Hannibal, revealed early on to be turned by the very man in question. There was no telling what she truly knew of the situation, if anything at all. Neither Hannibal nor Abigail had offered to expound on her story. All Will had ever been told was that Hannibal had turned her many years ago to save her life and kept her as his ward ever since.

The lack of details to fill in the gaps of Will’s mind only served to remind him how little he knew about these individuals. It would be so easy to get in over his head, even for a hunter as experienced as he was. For all he knew, the moment he sat in the car, he was done for.

But that was the kind of chance he had to take. People were dying. If something wasn’t done about the rebellion soon, mass graves wouldn’t be an unrealistic prospect.

Hannibal, thankfully, put his poise and wit to use. “Will and I require some time alone with one another, as friends often do.” He tilted his head ever so, eyes sparkling, and suddenly the implication was heavy in the air.

Abigail laughed brightly. “Well, you don’t say! Don’t let me stop you then. Please come visit *me* soon, won’t you Will? Hannibal shouldn’t be allowed to hog you all the time.”

Will chuckled and nodded, following Hannibal into the car. His smile fell the moment they shifted into drive. “Did you really have to give her *that* sort of impression?” he spat.

“Would you have preferred I let her feel rejected?” Hannibal suggested, voice coy. “Or better yet, have her inquisitive mind decide it would suit her interests to follow us?”

“No,” Will grumbled. He rubbed his hands on his knees. “Even so.”

“Is the concept really so disturbing?”

Will shot Hannibal a glare, saying nothing.

“Is it the fact that I’m a vampire?”

“I’m not dignifying this with an answer, Hannibal.” Will’s voice broached no room for discussion.

Graciously, Hannibal let it drop. “We will be going to the location involved in your initial contract upon my head.”

The statement was so unexpected and apropos of nothing that Will nearly jumped in his seat. “I beg your pardon?”

“The foundry. That is, in fact, where you were informed that I apparently murdered numerous human men, yes?”

Will clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Yes, but you and I are both aware that contract was a political move. Not one of law enforcement.”

“And that makes it irrelevant?” Hannibal asked, turning down a back road towards the metalworks. “It is, in fact, the most relevant place I can take you to explain our situation.”

“And what exactly is our situation?”

“The situation as you know it stands as this.” Hannibal paused to ensure Will was listening.

Will nodded, realizing that for the first time that night, Hannibal actually intended to be at least vaguely forthcoming.

Appeased by Will’s attention, Hannibal spoke. “The woman who, in all likelihood, is soon to become Ostwich’s mayor offered you a contract on a vampire who, by all accounts, brutally maimed and killed six of your people. Workers tasked with building an addition to foundry seventy-six, the one primarily utilized for the processing, casting, and smithing of precious metals, to be specific. Precious metals, for instance, such as quicksilver and palladium.”

Will blinked slowly, digesting the words as they hit the air. “You’re leading.”

“I am,” Hannibal agreed after a pause. The car hit a stone and they jostled a bit. “This political entity that assigned you to this task—“

“Just call her Alana Bloom, would you? We both know who you’re talking about.”

“Miss Bloom gave you a subpar contract. No name, no identity, no extensive information other than my likeness and the location of my home.” Hannibal stopped for a moment and Will wondered if it was to reign in irritation. “I, as you know, am an officially recognized dignitary for the Nordic peoples who migrated here in the middle of the war. In fact, I was involved in the organization and enactment of the very treaties the rebellion now opposes.”

Will looked at the other man sharply. “You never told me that. It’s not in the records.”

The smile on Hannibal’s face was a grim one. “Yes, well. After the accord, many of our human counterparts decided to misplace a few essential records. As of yet, we have not entirely discerned

their motives. We have suspicions, but no solid leads as of yet. It's all assumption."

Will didn't bother asking who the collective "we" was referring to.

Hannibal pulled off the main road and onto the dirt, keeping a curiously wide berth of the foundries. A cloud of dust flew up into the air like smoke in the blackness. "I can only assume the reason they sent you after me is connected to the loss of those documents. Administrator Bloom, or whoever had passed the task to her, had the expectation that a hunter would rather shoot me than ask questions. As luck would have it, they sent one of the few that wouldn't do precisely that."

"I'm no fool. I'm aware there was a game at play with that contract, but if the true intention was your death, they would have sent someone like Tobias Budge. He would have killed you without blinking even if he had discovered the deception." Will ran a hand through his hair, catching on the goggles he had long since forgotten were wrapped there. "I have a consistent record of bringing in primarily live contracts. My kill record is slimmer than most."

"I mean no offense, Will, but a slim kill record for a hunter still tends to be a rather long one."

Will said nothing to that, pursing his lips and staring out the window. "Why are we keeping away from the foundry lights?" Hannibal was driving out back of the very structure they had been talking about. The power lights, rare except in industrial areas, were a good hundred feet from them and for the first time, Will noticed Hannibal had switched the buggy lights off. "Are we sneaking past someone?"

"I'm a vampire, Will. Sneaking is in my nature." Dismissive. Avoidant.

Will snorted. "Fine. Have it your way. Finish up with this story you're telling."

Hannibal pulled to a stop and shut the car off completely. They were surrounded by dirt and darkness. "For all my years, I won't claim to know why they sent you, but I know without a second of hesitation that they sent *you* purposefully. I will discover the truth of that, rest assured." He turned and his eyes pierced into Will's.

In a sudden flash of panic, Will feared he had been discovered. His ruse had been outed. Someone at the commission had spoken out of turn. One of his conversations with Jack had been overheard. His behavior with Hannibal had been just a hair off. But then, Hannibal smiled once more and Will let his hackles lower. "I still don't understand why you've brought me here."

"When I discovered that although the intention might not have been my death, there was still distinctive intention, I proceeded to investigate the crime of which I was falsely accused," Hannibal explained. "This began eight months ago, when we first met. Since then, I have acquired some interesting information. Some of it I had already known. Some of it was new to me." He gestured towards the building. "The incident that took place at this foundry was indeed enacted by a vampire. It was purposeful. In the week following the murders, the foundry was closed to everyone except the commission, giving certain individuals ample time to do what they needed."

Will tried desperately not to appear eager. His fingers were digging into his thighs. His face remained impassive. "Which was?"

Hannibal stared at him then with an expression Will didn't recognize. "I can kill you, Will. You are aware of this?"

Taken aback and more than a little miffed, Will sat back. "I could say the same back to you."

Hannibal looked *pleased*. "I've no doubt that your attempt would be a valiant one. You may even succeed."

"I would succeed," Will hissed, eyes narrowing. "I'm good at what I do, Hannibal. Now do you care to tell me why you've resorted to idle threats?"

Hannibal lightly traced pale fingers over the driver's wheel. "Because I am going to present information to you that, if you misuse it, will give me cause."

"That's your decision to make." Will chewed his tongue, debating. "Although, to be honest, I still don't know why you're endeavoring to trust me at all. I may have decided to drop your contract, but I'm still a hunter."

"And yet you have visited my home on numerous occasions, including tonight, and made no attempt on the life or freedom of either myself or any of my houseguests."

"You've yet to give me reason."

"I am, in fact, involved with the aptly name 'rebellion'." Hannibal said it as sharply and suddenly as he did whenever he said anything important. Will fell silent again. "I suspect many of your people believe I am in a role of leadership. Given my ranking and age, it's an understandable assumption, but it is a false one. In truth my involvement with the rebels is not entirely willing any longer." He was staring at the foundry. Will was staring at him.

"Those are dangerous words."

"You have no idea."

"I could arrest you for this."

Hannibal licked his lips, still staring ahead. "You will not."

"Stop making me ask why, Hannibal."

"Very well." And with that, Hannibal was exiting the vehicle and walking into the darkness towards the massive building before them.

Stammering, Will clumsily tossed himself out of the car and ran after the man ahead of him. "Hannibal!"

Hannibal's hand was up immediately, silencing. "I will ask you to keep your voice lowered, Will. We were not invited here."

"It's only a foundry!"

Hannibal stopped short, causing Will to nearly bump into him. When he turned, his face was irked. "Have you listened to nothing I've told you? This foundry is no longer controlled by your people. That was the entire purpose."

Realization rolled onto Will like a slow wave. "They replaced the staff."

A nod. “Among other things. This metalworks is now the proud processing plant for rebellion weaponry.”

“But inspections—“

“Surely you are aware of corruption, bribery, or any of a multitude of tactics to keep such things hidden or ignored.” Hannibal sounded disappointed. Will tried not to let it get to him. “I’m going to show you why you are not only going to allow me to retain my freedom, but work alongside me in the coming months.”

Will couldn’t help it, he let out a bark of a laugh before Hannibal’s answering glare cut him silent again. “You’re mad.”

“You’re still walking with me, so I suppose you’re just as mad as I am.”

Will didn’t say anything for the rest of the walk. He could hear the loud and obnoxious sounds of metalworking long before they reached the rear entrance to the building—a clang, a hiss, a sizzle of steam. The air smelled like stepping into the molten vein of a mine; sharp and heavy. Will had never liked being inside foundries. They were unbearably hot from the fires and filthy in a way that you didn’t find in a natural state. There was soot, coal, and char. The buildings were comprised of thick metal and stocky masonry and the facilities seemed to steam straight through the oxygen. They were stifling places.

Hannibal, of course, seemed completely undeterred as they opened the door and stepped inside the inhospitable environment. Will immediately regretted not leaving his duster in the car. A sticky sweat formed on his brow and beneath his collar and he tugged open the first couple buttons of his shirt, trying to give his skin room to breathe. Hannibal remained unphased. Will was tempted to wipe soot from the floor and shove it into the other man’s face.

The dark figure of Hannibal lingered beneath a staircase for a moment, entirely out of place with the sounds of the metalworkers banging off in some distant part of the building.

Will crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you not know where you’re going?”

Hannibal raised a temperate brow back in Will’s direction. “I am listening for the locations of the individuals in the building. I’d rather avoid confrontation if I am able.”

Now Will felt the fool. Brushing off the embarrassment, he threw a question out into the room. “If you’re part of the rebellion, willing or otherwise,” he couldn’t contain the traces of disbelief in his tone. “Why would any of them attack you?”

Hannibal’s lips tightened and he said nothing, turning his attention back to another staircase. This one led downwards. “This way.” He descended.

Sighing, Will followed him, resigning himself to whatever fate the night had in store for him. He’d come this far, after all. Their shoes made soft, metallic clicks with every step they took, dulled to a muted tap by the cacophony of the rest of the foundry. Will let his fingers slide along the wall, relishing the change in temperature as the material slowly grew cooler to the touch with each step further into the depths. “Only three of the foundries have lower levels,” he muttered absently. “The others are close enough to the canals to make use of the water.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement. “Indeed. These sublevels allow a cool, dry environment in order for more volatile metals to be altered and stored.”

“Ideal for the storage of illegal weapons, I suppose.”

Hannibal shot a look over his shoulder and Will knew he had fallen back into the man’s ever-changing good graces once more. “Precisely, Will.”

“I don’t see how showing me these things will encourage me to turn a blind eye.” They reached the bottom of the staircase and Hannibal turned immediately right, leading down a musty hall. Oil lanterns sparsely lit the way. Not a soul was in sight. Will’s hand didn’t leave the grip of his revolver. “You’ve already told me they exist. In court, visual confirmation will only serve to solidify your involvement in this.”

“I am not taking you here to show you weapons, Will,” Hannibal replied easily. “Though you will undoubtedly see some of the stocks, they do not remain here for long.” He came to a stop in front of a large door, hinges cast in iron and looking every bit as ominous as it likely was. The sounds of the foundry were muffled overhead. “Before we continue, I would like to make my proposal irrefutably clear.”

Will made an involuntary sound of surprise. “That’s a first.” Hannibal stood to his full height, straight-backed and poised. He was, without argument, an intimidating man when he wanted to be. Will didn’t shrink back or flinch. He met his gaze head on. “Let’s hear it.”

Hannibal inclined his head slightly. “Thank you for being willing to listen to me, Will. You are far more level-headed than you like to admit.”

Will fought off a scowl and chose to keep his acrimonious retorts to himself. He was a grown man. He could behave himself if he needed to.

“I propose that you assist me in sabotaging the rebellion. It has become uncontrollable—moving itself from even my extended reach.” Hannibal presented the idea as though he were discussing the weather; as though it was as important as warning someone about an incoming rain storm. He sounded nothing like a man proposing what was damn near guerilla war and espionage. “I find myself...” A rare moment in which Hannibal had to consider his words. “Displeased by the turn the rebellion has taken and the methods with which they have decided to achieve their goals.”

Will tried to speak. Truly, he did, but his throat had closed up. He had anticipated a great many ways this could have turned out. None of those outcomes included a scheme to undo the rebels. “You are entirely unpredictable, aren’t you?” he asked eventually. His mouth felt dry.

Hannibal’s face betrayed nothing of his thoughts. He looked at the door and back to Will. “I make every effort to remain that way. The moment you can be predicted, you might as well walk yourself to the coroner to save him the trouble of fetching you.” They stared at one another for a moment. “What say you to my proposition?”

“I say why the in the seven levels of hell do you want to take down the rebellion? You are a diplomat, Hannibal, not a soldier.”

“I am a great many things,” Hannibal countered with ease. “Few of which are known by you.”

A chill crept down Will's spine. While the statement wasn't a blatant threat, the weight of the words did not go unnoticed. Sometimes Will forgot who he was dealing with despite himself. This man was hundreds of years old. He had seen wars—their beginnings and ends—and likely taken part in a few of them himself. Will's own impulsive desire to rebel against Hannibal's assumptions about his character were causing him to become careless and naïve. "Right."

Hannibal's gaze softened as though he could hear the self-deprecating thoughts parading around Will's mind. "As for why I wish to oppose the rebellion, I've said. They have taken to tactics of which I do not approve and what control I once had in their endeavors is beginning to slip from my grasp. I am not so proud as to ignore when I am losing a battle."

There was so much story here. Will could feel it in every bone of his body. So much he didn't know. So much Hannibal hadn't told him. And yet, he wanted to know more. He wanted to dive deeper into whatever bleak mess he had found himself being lured into. It was fascinating and alluring just like any self-destructive path had a tendency to be. Will was drawn to Hannibal's enigmatic world like a bee to honey. He couldn't help himself. He wasn't here for Jack and his half-assed orders to infiltrate the rebellion. He was here because he wanted to know more. He wanted to discover these secrets.

It occurred to him then that Hannibal had probably known this about him all along. "This may be a trap. A ruse to goad me into falling prey to a scheme."

"Perhaps. Both of us are taking a risk in this endeavor."

"I don't see what I get out of this." Will gestured out into empty space. "As far as I can tell, the only purpose this would serve me would be to not only put me right in the crosshairs of the rebellion, but risk my trust with the commission. I sincerely doubt that you wish for your plans to be reported back to the deputies."

Hannibal's lips twitched. "You are not wrong."

Will let his hands fall to his sides. "Then what motivation could I possibly have to agree to this?" *Besides aggravatingly persistent curiosity* were the words he didn't say.

"Because regardless of whatever you would have those around you believe, you are a man of morals and principles," Hannibal answered, reaching for the door and pulling the handle with a precise twist of his wrist. The door slid open and a creak echoed against the walls. "And it is precisely those characteristics that I hope will inspire you to assist me."

Will's eyes twitched towards the door and back to Hannibal, refusing to lose focus. "You have never struck me as a man occupied with extensive concerns of morality."

"My morals aren't what are necessary for this to succeed, Will." With one firm shove, Hannibal pushed the door open. "Yours, however, are paramount."

As Will opened his mouth to reply, he felt his jaw catch and hang where it was. There was a sound—soft and barely there in the hum of the machinery and thickness of the air—a whimper. Eyes wide, Will swung his gaze into the room, nearly barreling into it without a second thought. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, for there were no lamps here and the flickering glow from the hall was a slow bleed, but it was enough light for him to see them.

It was enough for him to see the shivering and huddled individuals against the wall. They were crumpled to the floor, cowering together as they tried to mold themselves into the masonry to escape Will and Hannibal's presence. One of them, a young man by the looks of it, whispered a quiet "please", but Will barely had the ears to hear him above the blood pounding in his veins.

They were humans; the lot of them. All chained in archaic shackles that chafed their ankles and kept them confined to the horrific cell of a room.

Will had a thousand thoughts running through his mind, each more chaotic than the last. The one that made it past his lips was not the one he intended. "Why was the door unlocked?"

He felt Hannibal stiffen behind him and for a wild moment, Will thought he had truly been lured into a trap and he would be shoved into the room with the other prisoners. Instead, he quickly realized that Hannibal had stiffened from the question itself.

Instinct took over and Will turned around. "Hannibal. Why was the door unlocked?"

Hannibal was turned away from him entirely, staring down the hall with eyes that had shifted into something predatory and cautious. "I fear I may have miscalculated, Will."

"What?"

The young man who had spoken before whispered again and Will turned to him, confused. "They unlock it every night," the man murmured, huddling closer to the woman at his right. "At the same time. To feed us and then..." The woman against his side sobbed and he cut himself off to console her.

The ice settling in Will's gut may have well been lead. "This is a feeding room." Bile was in his throat. He could taste it. "This is a fucking feeding room."

"Yes," was all Hannibal said in acknowledgement. He was still tense and staring into the darkness. "We must leave now, Will."

"Hannibal, we can't leave these people!"

Hannibal's hand was on Will's arm in an instant, gripping tightly and demanding attention. Will hissed in pain. "This is not a request. The door was unlocked, Will. This is an error on my part, entirely. I hadn't been conscious of the time. I was unfocused. We must—"

Will jerked his arm roughly from Hannibal's grasp. "I will *not* leave them!"

Then, against all his composure and stature, Hannibal bared his teeth. He *bared* them—feral and threatening—and for a moment Will saw the monster within him. He saw the distinct separation between them. "Will, they will ret—"

"You really are slipping, Hannibal."

The conversation snapped to a halt and both men looked towards the intruder.

Hannibal stepped away from Will, his former insistence faded away into cold focus. "Maxwell. Fancy seeing you here."

Will would have laughed at the quip if the situation hadn't been so tense.

The man identified as Maxwell stepped forward into the light of a lantern, two looming shadows standing behind him; waiting and watching. He smiled and his fangs caught the light. Vampire, then. Will drew his revolver without a second thought. It wouldn't kill the man, but it would slow him down.

Maxwell chuckled at the sight of Will's gun before turning his attention back to Hannibal. "Look at you. The great and powerful Hannibal Lecter, skulking about uninvited. And with a hunter, no less. You're starting to choose your allies poorly." When Hannibal said nothing, he took another step forward. "You know this is no place for you."

"You have no authority to give me orders," Hannibal cut back smoothly. For all his calm veneer, Will could tell he was ready to pounce at any given moment. He was a coiled spring. Every muscle was tense and ready. "I'm sure you're aware I cannot let you leave."

Maxwell rolled his eyes. "Can't let *me* leave. You wander uninvited into my place of business and threaten me?"

It was Hannibal who stepped forward this time. "You forget who I am."

Will saw a flicker of hesitation in the other vampire's face before it vanished as quickly as it had shown. "You are not what you once were. Regardless of whether or not you have a hunter at your side, there are three of us."

And it seemed then that the conversation was over, because the next thing Will knew, Hannibal had one of the shadows by the throat and was pinning him to the wall. There was a flurry of movement as the other two moved quickly away, Maxwell towards Will and the other further down the hall. Then a shuddering cough, a growl, a tearing, and Will watched as the man against the wall became two pieces on the floor, the tube of his trachea lying by the wall.

Will swallowed thickly at the sight. Hannibal had ripped out another vampire's throat. With one hand. Said vampire was still wriggling on the floor, fingers scrabbling and trying in vain to close the chasm of the wound. Hannibal's voice crept out above the spluttering sound of death.

"Now there are two. A more even match, I should think."

Will didn't bother to wait for a reaction. He was no stranger to the unexpected. Hunting was a dangerous gig, after all, and Will had no intention of dying at the hands of some half-rate vampire.

He managed to get one shot off before he was on the ground. It hit Maxwell square in the shoulder. The cramped space made the sound of the shot reverberate like an explosion and Will's ears were ringing even as the mythic dove on top of him with snapping teeth—like an animal. Will's gun skittered uselessly across the floor and he reached down with sweating palms to unhitch the dagger from his thigh.

He coughed as a strong fist collided with his face and he tasted blood. His head snapped back with the force of it and the impact against the floor brought spots of color into his focus like fireflies. Immediately, Will's heart kicked into adrenaline even as he saw the pupils of the eyes above his own dilate. A thousand curses pelted through Will's head in quick succession and he unsnapped the latch of his knife sheath. He had broken rule number one.

Never let yourself bleed in a fight against a vampire.

Maxwell wrapped his fist in Will's scarf, pulling roughly and cutting off his windpipe. Gasping, Will finally got a grip on his blade and dug it viciously up into the mythic's side. His vision was already blurring around the edges. He could hear the sounds of a fight further down the hall. He twisted the blade and Maxwell snarled in pain, letting go of the scarf.

Using the distraction, Will thrust his bodyweight up and threw them off balance, leaving the blade lodged in the other man's side as he scrambled for the flask in his pocket. Ripping out the cork with his teeth and spitting away his own blood and bitter fluid that splashed out from the flask, Will tossed the contents onto his opponent.

Maxwell, who had been in the process of dragging a blade from his own belly, froze. His eyes went comically wide for a moment, all sense of aggression overcome by panic. "No. That was—" He looked over at Will and extended a hand. "No, wait!"

But Will was done. With a growl and a deliberate gaze, he grabbed the oil lantern from the wall. Fear had spilled alongside the flask's contents over Maxwell's face and he turned to flee.

Will threw the lantern.

Even as the hall lit up brightly in flames, hued by a clear and ghostly green, Will didn't move. The screams rooted him to the spot. It was not regret that held him there as he watched Maxwell burn, no. The screams, though. They pierced him. They chilled his skin and made his stomach sour.

Will hadn't realized the deed was long since done until he felt Hannibal's hand on his shoulder and noticed the smoldering corpse of what was once a vampire on the floor before him. He took in a steadying breath and turned around. The other victim of their battle was an absolute mess. Will wasn't certain he was identifiable. Bits and pieces of him were strewn about like confetti. It reminded Will more of the result of a werewolf gone rabid than a vampire and once again he was forced to reconsider his perception of Hannibal.

"You've certainly earned your reputation, Will."

Will didn't bother to spare Hannibal a second glance. He used the scarf—that blasted thing—to wipe some of the blood from his lips. "Who did we just kill?"

"Middlemen. Nothing more." Hannibal had pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, managing to look dignified ever as he wiped the blood from his palms. He raised a curious eyebrow towards the charred remains of Maxwell. "Dead man's blood. I was under the impression that was banned from the commission some time ago."

"Well it's useful when a vampire goes psychotic on me," Will retorted, leaning down to grab his dagger from the floor. He hissed a wince through his teeth at the heat of it and quickly sheathed it back against his thigh. He would clean it later. "Most don't know what it is."

"You disguise it as accelerant by placing it in oil. It's curiously ingenious."

Unsure how to respond to a vampire complimenting him on a method he used to kill the man's own kind, Will simply grunted. "Aren't the rebels going to ask questions about what happened here?"

"Most certainly." Hannibal paused, giving Will an odd sort of once-over. "Forgive me, but if you will allow me a privilege."

Will turned to him, about to ask what the hell he was on about, when Hannibal suddenly snatched up his scarf and tugged him closer with a sharp snap. Before Will could utter a single syllable of protest, Hannibal's mouth was on his own.

It was as brief as it was startling and with one swipe of tongue the older man was pulling back from him and stepping away. "Apologies."

Will's face flushed red—from rage, from shock, from other things. "If I *allow*?"

Hannibal looked entirely nonplussed. "I admit I took liberties."

"Liberties?" Will spluttered. If he hadn't just seen the man take someone else apart with his bare hands, he would have punched him. Luckily Will had more self-preservation instincts than that. "Honestly?"

"Rest the blame on the excitement of battle, if it appeals to you," Hannibal suggested.

Will licked his lips and tasted the blood there. "Or you were just hungry."

Hannibal chuckled and pocketed the now destroyed handkerchief. "The deaths of these men will not be attributed to me. Dead men tell no tales." His eyes wandered back to the open door of the feeding room as he said this.

Will followed his gaze and stormed towards his forgotten revolver as soon as he realized the implication. Whirling around, he aimed the gun at Hannibal's face. "No."

Hannibal smiled and shook his head like someone amused by the antics of a child. "What do you intend to do with that, Will?"

"What I have to. You will not kill those people."

"They have seen our faces."

"They are victims!"

A sigh and Hannibal was raising a placating palm. "I am not arguing otherwise, but the fact remains that they can identify us to whomever arrives to clean up our mess."

"We'll set them free!" Will insisted, aim unwavering. "They have no reason to offer any information to their captors. They were held here against their will, Hannibal. They owe no loyalty to the rebellion."

Tiring of the argument, Hannibal sured his footing and stared Will down. "And if one of them is a thrall? What then, Will?"

"I'm willing to take that chance."

"I am not." As though he thought the discussion was over, Hannibal moved to step into the room.

Will reacted on reflex, grabbing the man and shoving him against the wall. The muzzle of his revolver was digging into Hannibal's jugular. "*No*. This I cannot allow."

“These are but a speck of dust in the pile of bodies the rebellion has claimed.” Hannibal paid no mind to the gun currently denting a mark into his flesh. “Are you truly willing to sacrifice the others for so few? If only one of these individuals speaks, everything is lost.”

Will’s blood was boiling. “You said to me that my morals are paramount. You said chose that exact word before. Did you mean it?”

Hannibal frowned, saying nothing.

Will pressed the gun harder and wondered if it even hurt or if Hannibal was as impervious as steel. “If my morals are so crucial to this plot of yours, then heed them now. We will not kill these people. We will free them. They will run because we will tell them to. If consequence finds us, we will take it, because we are not leaving these people to die and nor will they die by our hands.”

Seconds past like the finite tick of the clock in the bell tower. Each moment could be counted by a heartbeat, a breath, and the stillness of the air. The two men stared each other down, neither willing to budge.

Ultimately, it was Hannibal who admitted defeat. “On both our heads the consequences,” he said darkly.

“Yes, well.” Will stepped away, holstering his revolver with a warning look in Hannibal’s direction. “That was the plan, wasn’t it?”

And that statement seemed to jar Hannibal into a more willing acquiescence. “Then you consent to my proposition?”

“I consent to hearing you out in depth,” Will offered hesitantly, but even as he said it, he knew he was agreeing to far more. “I find my leanings in the direction of consideration.”

The look on Hannibal’s face said that he knew he’d won. Will proceeded to pretend he didn’t notice the gloating.

From that point on in the night, they proceeded to free the men and women from their shackles and lead them out into the cool of the night. There were eight of them in total; all haggard and terrified. One by one, Hannibal and Will sent them on their way, warning them away from the city. In the end, the risk of Will’s decision settled heavily onto his back.

He knew Hannibal was right, of course. From the standpoint of practicality, allowing these people to run free of their own accord was opening up an entire avenue for the possibility of discovery. All it would take was one of them reporting to the wrong person what they had seen, heard, or witnessed in the basement of the foundry. Just one, and Hannibal and Will would have targets on their heads so large they wouldn’t be able to dodge it for miles.

Yet, despite knowing this, Hannibal held up his side of the bargain. He assisted with each and every one of the people until they were safely out of the foundry and limping away into the darkness. He uttered no complaints or protests, but Will could practically feel the weight of his disapproval.

When they were finally back in Hannibal’s car and driving towards the city, Will broke the silence. “We just left the bodies on the floor.”

“Did you want to give them a burial?”

Will rubbed at his thighs, discomfited. “I suppose I’m unused to the barbarity of it.”

“For a hunter accustomed to dropping his pound of flesh at the feet of authorities, I can understand the sentiment.” Hannibal pointed down the road. “Your home is this way?”

Will watched the buildings pass by. Half the city was sleeping while the other half wandered restlessly about. Mythics and humans alike roamed the streets, each tending to business that was their own. He watched them listlessly. “Close enough.”

Hannibal had the dignity not to defend himself against Will’s adamancy not to reveal his home address. “I must confess, Will. You surprised me tonight. You held your own impressively.”

Will snorted at that. “You expected a hunter to be bested by a single vampire?”

“Not in the slightest,” came the reply. “But Maxwell was no simple prey. He had strength and by all accounts he made no efforts to reign it in when he attacked you.”

Will felt his body stiffen in increments. “Yes, well I’ve had worse.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Hannibal paused, eyeing Will for a moment. “The blow he landed on your face should have broken your jaw. Instead, you escaped with nothing more than a split lip. Do hunters often operate on such sheer luck?”

“We’ve got little else to operate on.” Will was trying to keep his responses as flippant as possible, but Hannibal was once again leading and he didn’t like where it was going. “I’m not sure what you want to hear.” He rolled down the passenger window. He needed air.

“As much as I enjoy you playing coy, Will, I am no simpleton. Luck is not what holds your jaw together.”

Will’s teeth were grinding together. His nerves were on the edge of a wire. “I’m not sure—“

“Is any of the commission aware that they have employed a mythic to hunt mythics?” Of anyone Will had ever met, Hannibal had a profound gift to make the most blunt statements sound infallibly tactful.

Will’s head swung around as though on a hinge. “I beg your pardon?”

Hannibal raised one challenging brow. It seemed he was done playing games for the night. “You are not entirely human. It is not a question, but a fact.”

“And what makes you—“ And suddenly Will remembered why his mouth tasted of copper; remembered the kiss. “You bastard. You were tasting me. You were *testing* me!”

“The results of which were quite illuminating,” Hannibal said tamely. He didn’t appear to be the least bit ashamed of his actions. “I had known you were unique, Will, but it seems I knew very little of how much.”

Rage was broiling in Will’s chest. He slammed his fist against the door. “Stop the car.”

“Will—“

“Stop the damn car!”

Surprisingly, Hannibal did just that, pulling the buggy to the side of the road and switching off the ignition. "I must confess, I'm curious about your motivations, Will. There are many mythics who are against the rebellion or finding themselves acclimatizing to the human culture more easily than others, but a hunter? It is incredibly curious."

"My motivations are none of your concern!" Will shouted, shoving open the door with a viciousness that was making his arms shake.

Hannibal watched him clamor out of the car. His eyes were narrowed and calculating as he observed Will's outburst with an almost academic interest. It wasn't until the irate hunter had slammed the door shut that he said Will's name just loud enough to hear over the commotion. "Will."

Will spun backwards with a snarl, throwing out his response like a verbal dagger. "*What?*"

"I won't pretend to know why you associate your heritage with such animosity." Hannibal caught Will's eyes through the window and, as he always managed to, held their gaze. "But I assure you that if you allow that to be a weakness, it will be used against you."

"By who?" Will sneered. "You?"

Hannibal shook his head, tilting it ever so slightly. "You have agreed to help me dismantle the rebellion, have you not?"

"I agreed to consider it," Will barked, shutting his eyes as he tried to reign in his anger. The next time he spoke, it was calmer. Not by a great deal, mind you, but he was making progress. "I'm not so certain now."

"I hope you will reconsider. After all, your hesitation will not stop her from continuing down her warpath."

In an instant, Will's anger was blunted into a dull confusion. "Who? Administrator Bloom?"

The expression on Hannibal's face said he thought the mere suggestion was daft. "Don't be ridiculous, Will."

Will had to stop himself from kicking Hannibal's damn car. "Illuminate me."

"I'm talking about the current leadership of the rebellion, the one who has ripped the strings I had wound around my fingers and wrapped them around her own." Hannibal turned the switch of the ignition and the car roared to life. He looked down the street and back at Will. "I'm talking, Will, about Abigail."

Time and reality ceased to exist. Will could have sworn he heard Abigail's laugh ringing like bells in the breeze. He blinked, dumbfounded. "Abigail? You can't be serious."

For a whisper of an instant, something akin to sadness or disappointment passed over Hannibal's face. "It's not common knowledge, Will. The ignorance is entirely intentional."

"We can't possibly be talking about the same girl!"

"And yet we are."

“But—“

Hannibal held up a silencing hand. “Rest. Consider. Ruminant on what I’ve told you. The scope of what you do not know far exceeds that which you do. I must return before my absence is questioned beyond simple excuses. This outing is likely to be associated with what took place at the foundry. Coincidental or not, it will be questioned and I will have much to do if I am to avoid suspicion.”

Will’s jaw snapped shut with a click of his teeth. He tightened his duster around his chest.

Hannibal looked him over one last time. “I am a man of convictions, Will. It is time to decide if you are as well.” He smiled, tense but real. “Goodnight.” With that, he drove away before Will could formulate a response, leaving the man to stand on the corner, absolutely flabbergasted.

Will was far too gone in shock to be bothered by the rudeness of being cut off in such a way. Hannibal had to be lying. There was no way Abigail was the perpetrator of these crimes. There was no realm in which the possibility of such a kind-hearted girl would be in command of such violence and depravity.

Will straightened and chewed his lip as a bitter, cold breeze struck his face. Yet, against all of his logic and internal debate, his gut was an intuitive one. What better ploy? What better deflection of suspicion than to portray oneself as an innocent? It was conniving and devious. If Hannibal was telling the truth, it was downright terrifying.

With a sigh that was bone-heavy, Will began his trek back to his apartment. It wouldn’t do to brood over it. Whether it was true or not, there was a great deal more going on here than Will had realized.

Hannibal had implied that the people imprisoned at the metalworks were only a few of many. He had flat-out told Will that the rebellion was manufacturing and stockpiling weapons. Hannibal’s own people had been willing to slaughter him simply for setting foot in the foundry. And now not only had he accused Abigail of being the mastermind behind the entirety of it, but he had discovered Will’s secret—a secret that if revealed could be his undoing.

While Hannibal had not outright threatened to blackmail him with the information, it was a distinct possibility and Will had to account for it.

Regardless, there was no way he could turn back now. Not with what he knew. Not with what he had yet to discover.

As Will stumbled into his darkened apartment and shut the door behind him, he leaned bodily into the wall, hand going up to toy with the stained scarf still hanging loosely around his neck. He could feel the bruising starting to form on his throat from where Maxwell had pulled the cloth tight. He swallowed and it stung.

Come what may, Will was in this now.

If he was entirely honest with himself, which he was never likely to be consciously or sober, he would admit that he had been in this from the moment he had first laid eyes upon Hannibal. The contract had been packed squarely in his pocket and Hannibal had regarded him with a curiosity that never quite seemed to be sated. It was a curiosity that was as contagious as the worst kind of disease and Will could feel his every cell being infected.

This was far from over. If it ended with the both of them alive and the city not up in flames, Will was going to down a whole damn bottle of whiskey. After all, he will have earned it.

End Notes

About a thousand loose ends and questions, but that's the fun of it, right? I hope you had fun reading.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!